

Great Law of Peace



Date ★ Around 1100

Place ★ Onondaga village near present-day Syracuse, New York

Type of Source ★ Government Document

Author ★ Attributed to Dekanawidah the Peacemaker and Ayonwatha (Hiawatha)

Context ★ Disgusted by endless tribal wars, Dekanawidah and Ayonwatha convinced the New York-area nations of the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, and Seneca (joined in 1720 by the Tusacarora) to join a federation named the Haudenosaunee (often called the Iroquois Federation). The Great Law of Peace, Ne Gayanshagowa, was its federal constitution. It was recorded on 117 beaded belts, using symbols as memory aides rather than as specific words. The Great Law balanced power between the federal assembly, the nations, and trans-national clans. Later Americans, especially Benjamin Franklin, probably used ideas from the Great Law for the U.S. Constitution.

I am Dekanawidah and with the Five Nations' Confederate Lords I plant the Tree of Great Peace. I plant it in your territory, **Adodarhoh**, and the Onondaga Nation, in the territory of you who are **Firekeepers**.

I name the tree the **Tree of the Great Long Leaves**. Under the shade of this Tree of the Great Peace we spread the soft white feathery down of the globe thistle as seats for you, Adodarhoh, and your cousin Lords.

We place you upon those seats, spread soft with the feathery down of the globe thistle, there beneath the shade of the spreading branches of the Tree of Peace. There shall you sit and watch the **Council Fire** of the Confederacy of the Five Nations, and all the affairs of the Five Nations shall be transacted at this place before you, Adodarhoh, and your cousin Lords, by the Confederate Lords of the Five Nations.

2. Roots have spread out from the Tree of the Great Peace, one to the north, one to the east, one to the south and one to the west. The name of these roots is The Great White Roots and their nature is Peace and Strength.

If any man or any nation outside the Five Nations shall obey the laws of the Great Peace and make known their disposition to the Lords of the Confederacy, they may trace the Roots to the Tree and if their minds are clean and they are obedient and promise to obey the wishes of the Confederate Council, they shall be welcomed to take shelter beneath the Tree of the Long Leaves. . . .

3. To you Adodarhoh, the Onondaga cousin Lords, I and the other Confederate Lords have entrusted the caretaking and the watching of the Five Nations Council Fire.

When there is any business to be transacted and the Confederate Council is not in session, a messenger shall be dispatched either to Adodarhoh, **Honowirehtonh** or **Skanawath**, Fire Keepers, or to their **War Chiefs** with a full

Adodarhoh

originally the name of the Onondaga chief who was the last chief to agree to the Great Peace; later it was the title of the host and chairman of the Confederate Council

Firekeepers

the Onondaga lords, responsible for overseeing the Council

Tree of the Great Long Leaves or Tree of the Long Leaves

a metaphoric name for the Iroquois Federation

Council Fire

All Iroquois assemblies are called Council Fires.

Honowirehtonh

record keeper of the Onondaga; as a result, he was the main secretary of the Confederate Council

Skanawath

Onondaga lord responsible for mobilizing the Iroquois warriors

War Chiefs

leaders of the nations, roughly similar to state governors, but with considerably more power

statement of the case desired to be considered. Then shall Adodarhoh call his cousin (associate) Lords together and consider whether or not the case is of sufficient importance to demand the attention of the Confederate Council. If so, Adodarhoh shall dispatch messengers to summon all the Confederate Lords to assemble beneath the Tree of the Long Leaves.

When the Lords are assembled the Council Fire shall be kindled, but not with **chestnut wood**, and Adodarhoh shall formally open the Council. Then shall Adodarhoh and his cousin Lords, the Fire Keepers, announce the subject for discussion.



9. All the business of the Five Nations Confederate Council shall be conducted by the two combined bodies of Confederate Lords. First the question shall be passed upon by the Mohawk and Seneca Lords, then it shall be discussed and passed by the Oneida and Cayuga Lords. Their decisions shall then be referred to the Onondaga Lords (Fire Keepers) for final judgement.

The same process shall obtain when a question is brought before the council by an individual or a War Chief.

10. In all cases the procedure must be as follows: when the Mohawk and Seneca Lords have **unanimously** agreed upon a question, they shall report their decision to the Cayuga and Oneida Lords who shall **deliberate** upon the question and report a unanimous decision to the Mohawk Lords. The Mohawk Lords will then report the standing of the case to the Fire Keepers, who shall render a decision as they see fit in case of a disagreement by the two bodies, or confirm the decisions of the two bodies if they are identical. The Fire Keepers shall then report their decision to the Mohawk Lords who shall announce it to the open council.

11. If through any misunderstanding or **obstinacy** on the part of the Fire Keepers, they render a decision at **variance** with that of the Two Sides, the Two Sides shall reconsider the matter and if their decisions are jointly the same as before they shall report to the Fire Keepers who are then **compelled** to confirm their joint decision.



17. A bunch of a certain number of **wampum** strings each two spans in length shall be given to each of the female families in which the Lordship titles are vested. The right of bestowing the title shall be **hereditary** in the family of the females legally possessing the bunch of shell strings and the strings shall be the **token** that the females of the family have the **proprietary** right to the Lordship title for all time to come, subject to certain restrictions **hereinafter** mentioned.



19. If at any time it shall be **manifest** that a Confederate Lord has not in mind the welfare of the people or disobeys the rules of this Great Law, the men or women of the Confederacy, or both jointly, shall come to the Council and

chestnut wood

chestnut wood throws off sparks when burned, so this serves as a metaphor that the lords shouldn't be disruptive of the Council's proceedings

unanimous

without any disagreement

deliberate

discuss and debate

obstinacy

stubbornness

variance

odds, in disagreement

compelled

forced

wampum

sacred shell beads used as symbols of leadership and to keep records (the Great Law itself was recorded with wampum)

hereditary

passed down through the generations of a family

token

sign, symbol

proprietary

exclusive, sole

hereinafter

later

manifest

obvious

upbraid the **erring** Lord through his War Chief. If the complaint of the people through the War Chief is not heeded the first time it shall be uttered again and then if no attention is given a third complaint and warning shall be given. If the Lord is **contumacious** the matter shall go to the council of War Chiefs. The War Chiefs shall then **divest** the erring Lord of his title by order of the women in whom the titleship is **vested**. When the Lord is deposed the women shall notify the Confederate Lords through their War Chief, and the Confederate Lords shall **sanction** the act. The women will then select another of their sons as a candidate and the Lords shall elect him.



35. Should any man of the Nation assist with special ability or show great interest in the affairs of the Nation, ...the Confederate Lords may elect him to a seat with them and he may sit in the Confederate Council...He shall be proclaimed a 'Pine Tree sprung up for the Nation' and shall be installed as such at the next assembly for the **installation** of Lords. Should he ever do anything contrary to the rules of the Great Peace, he may not be deposed from office – no one shall cut him down – but thereafter everyone shall be deaf to his voice and his advice. Should he resign his seat and title no one shall prevent him. A Pine Tree chief has no authority to name a successor nor is his title hereditary.



36. ...The War Chiefs shall be selected from the eligible sons of the female families holding the head Lordship titles.

37. There shall be one War Chief for each Nation and their duties shall be to carry messages for their Lords and to take up the arms of war in case of emergency. They shall not participate in the **proceedings** of the Confederate Council but shall watch its progress and in case of an **erroneous** action by a Lord they shall receive the complaints of the people and **convey** the warnings of the women to him. The people who wish to convey messages to the Lords in the Confederate Council shall do so through the War Chief of their Nation. It shall ever be his duty to lay the cases, questions and **propositions** of the people before the Confederate Council.



42. ...These clans distributed through their respective Nations, shall be the sole owners and holders of the soil of the country and in them is it vested as a **birthright**.

43. People of the Five Nations members of a certain clan shall recognize every other member of that clan, **irrespective** of the Nation, as relatives. Men and women, therefore, members of the same clan are forbidden to marry.

44. The **lineal descent** of the people of the Five Nations shall run in the female line. Women shall be considered the **progenitors** of the Nation. They shall own the land and the soil. Men and women shall follow the **status** of the mother.



upbraid
scold, correct

erring
offending

contumacious
rebellious

divest
remove from office

vested
belongs to

sanction
approve

installation
induction of new members

proceedings
business

erroneous
improper

convey
carry

propositions
suggestions, proposals

birthright
inheritance

irrespective
regardless

lineal descent
line of inheritance; Unlike most European and Asian societies, inheritance was tracked through mothers. Inherited male positions such as war chiefs went not from father to son, as they would have in Europe, but from uncle to nephew (the son of the war chief's sister).

progenitors
ancestors

status
rank, social position

65. I, Dekanawida, and the Union Lords, now uproot the tallest pine tree and into the **cavity** thereby made we cast all weapons of war. Into the depths of the earth, down into the deep underearth currents of water flowing to unknown regions we cast all the weapons of **strife**. We bury them from sight and we plant again the tree. Thus shall the Great Peace be established and **hostilities** shall no longer be known between the Five Nations but peace to the United People.

Note: This section is the source of the expression “burying the hatchet”.



80. When the Confederate Council of the Five Nations has for its object the establishment of the Great Peace among the people of an outside nation and that nation refuses to accept the Great Peace, then by such refusal they bring a declaration of war upon themselves from the Five Nations. Then shall the Five Nations seek to establish the Great Peace by a conquest of the rebellious nation.

81. When the men of the Five Nations, now called forth to become warriors, are ready for battle with an **obstinate** opposing nation that has refused to accept the Great Peace, then one of the five War Chiefs shall be chosen by the warriors of the Five Nations to lead the army into battle.



93. Whenever a specially important matter or a great emergency is presented before the Confederate Council and the nature of the matter affects the entire body of the Five Nations, threatening their **utter** ruin, then the Lords of the Confederacy must submit the matter to the decision of their people and the decision of the people shall affect the decision of the Confederate Council. This decision shall be a confirmation of the voice of the people.

94. The men of every clan of the Five Nations shall have a Council Fire ever burning in readiness for a council of the clan. When it seems necessary for a council to be held to discuss the welfare of the clans, then the men may gather about the fire. This council shall have the same rights as the council of the women.

95. The women of every clan of the Five Nations shall have a Council Fire ever burning in readiness for a council of the clan. When in their opinion it seems necessary for the interest of the people they shall hold a council and their decisions and recommendations shall be introduced before the Council of the Lords by the War Chief for its consideration.

96. All the Clan council fires of a nation or of the Five Nations may unite into one general council fire, or delegates from all the council fires may be appointed to unite in a general council for discussing the interests of the people. The people shall have the right to make appointments and to delegate their power to others of their number. When their council shall have come to a conclusion on any matter, their decision shall be reported to the Council of the Nation or to the Confederate Council (as the case may require) by the War Chief or the War Chiefs.

cavity
hole

strife
conflict

hostilities
conflicts

obstinate
stubborn

utter
complete

97. Before the real people united their nations, each nation had its council fires. Before the Great Peace their councils were held. The five Council Fires shall continue to burn as before and they are not **quenched**. The Lords of each nation in future shall settle their nation's affairs at this council fire governed always by the laws and rules of the council of the Confederacy and by the Great Peace.

quenched
extinguished

Source: www.indigenouspeople.net

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